POSTAL HISTORY - THE BASICS

by Vernon S. Stroupe

What is postal history? By definition, it is a study of the postal system or any part of it. This study can be approached from many directions and from diverse interests. Why should we be interested in studying postal history?
It is the study of:

*The political emergence of a postal system,
*The postal laws and their social effects,
*The post offices, postal routes, and transportation of the mail,
*Postmasters and postal employees and,
*Genealogy through the addressee and addressor,
*Historical context of material sent through the mail,
*Postmarks, postal rate usage and stamps.

The latter two will be our basic subject for discussion in this article, but all the above overlap and are useful to the understanding of the whole. The study of postmarks, rates, and stamps on covers starts with an accumulation or collection of postally used envelopes. The object is to find some basic things about each item in the accumulation, which can then be arranged into a collection around a topic or theme. We need to find out:

- Where did this cover originate?
- What stamp is this?
- When was it mailed?
- What do these markings mean?
- Who was the addressee?
- Who was the addressor?
- Were the contents historically meaningful?

There is almost no "right" or "wrong" way to collect postal history. The only mistake that a collector can make is to remove stamps from their covers, cut the backs off the envelopes, drastically reduce the size of the envelope by trimming, or in some other way destroy the cover. The collector has the option of collecting a country, state, county, or just a city. The collector can specialize in a period, such as the Civil War, the Colonial period, or any time frame which interests him. Or, he can collect everything.

The first mail was carried to-and-from North Carolina by ship captains.[1] The Colonial post offices were a loose arrangement of merchants, sea captains and forwarding agents who accepted mail headed for destinations that they serviced. The rate was fixed by the Crown and paid to the Crown, less fees.

The Colonial mail was carried north and south by land over the Great Road which ran from New Orleans to New York and over post roads which ran inland through the state. Letters carried over the Great Road with North Carolina markings are unknown today. The first post road was through the coastal plain and made stops at Edenton, Plymouth, Washington, New Berne, Richland and Wilmington. The second had stops at Warrenton, Louisburg, Raleigh, Averysboro, Fayetteville, and Lumberton.

Travel was hazardous and the mail did not always get through. The early Federal post offices operated on the Colonial system, utilizing the same mail routes from 1774 until 1792. Figure 1 shows a 1787 letter from Philadelphia to Edenton that traveled along this route. It was from William R. Davie, a member of the North Carolina delegation to the Second Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, to North Carolina Chief Justice James Iredell in Edenton. The small black circular marking in the upper left corner is a datestamp of Philadelphia modeled after the British Bishop marking, showing the day above the month. The British version had a horizontal line between the two numbers, while the American version had no line. The numeral for the day can not be seen on this marking, but the month abbreviation

"IY" was for July. The handstamp FREE indicated that the sender was able to mail the letter without payment as a member of the delegation. The free franking will be discussed later. Edenton, New Berne, Wilmington, Washington, Halifax, Tarborough, Fayetteville, Salem, Salisbury, Charlotte, and Hillsborough had postal service in 1789. In 1792 and 1794 legislative changes were made and forty-eight post offices were established between 1792 and 1795. The population that did not live on or near one of the post roads had to rely on freight wagons or travelers to carry their mail to and from the closest post office. In the main, travelers were responsible in carrying out this duty. Some communities employed a private post rider to carry out and bring in their mail.

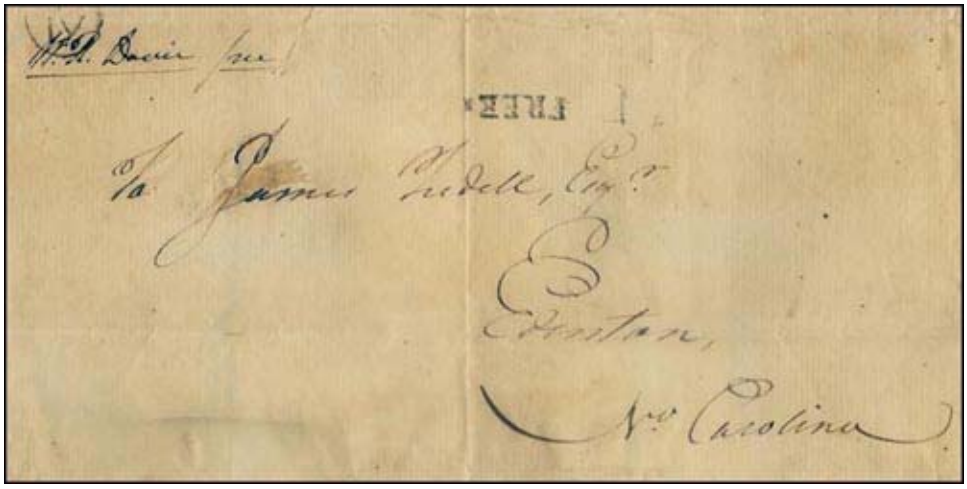

Figure 1. Philadelphia to Edenton - 1787 from William R. Davie, member from North Carolina to the Second Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia to Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, James Iredell, in Edenton. Note the FREE frank of William Davie and the Philadelphia "Bishop Mark" datestamp in the upper left.

The mail was carried between post offices along the post roads by contract. The means of transportation was specified according to the route, some specified stage coach, freight wagon, pony riders, etc. The pony riders tended to be boys and young men, many who of whom were unreliable. At least one account is known of a slave being used as a rider. The mail carriers had to contend with bad roads, floods, storms, unusable ferries, contrary animals, and robbers.

By examining the rates and markings, the postal historian can tell the era in which a folded letter or envelope was used by the postal rate and supplemental markings even if no year date is on the correspondence. The most important marking on a letter from the point of view of the collector is the post office. The earliest of these was simply a manuscript marking. Manuscript markings are to be found until the 1880s even though postal regulations required a handstamp after 1857. The other markings are usually a postal rate and date, but too often the date did not include the year.

Supplemental postal markings help to clarify the date of their usage. Way markings, meaning that a post rider accepted the letter along his route for deposit in the post office to which he was going, were used as early as the Colonial period, but without additional payment. In 1794, a rate of two cents was applied to letters delivered by the post rider along his route more than two miles from the nearest post office. In 1825 this amount was changed to one cent for both receiving and delivery, and, in 1836 the way route charge was changed back to two cents. Drop letter rates, that is, letters posted to an address serviced by the same post office, began in 1794 at one cent and was increased to two cents in 1845. Some other supplementary markings are Due, Ship, Steam, Express, Advertised and Registered.

The color of the postal markings is sometimes significant. Black predominates, but red became very popular in the mid-1820s and was used until the end of the Civil War when red stamps became the color for the first class rate. A light red postal marking on a red stamp made it easy for stamps to be reused, so red became a color only occasionally used. The inks have been used in all colors of the rainbow by various postmasters. Some of the early postmasters had to make their own inks, and the result was usually a messy cancellation. These markings can be identified by an oily spread around the edges of the marking. Pittsboro markings of 1840s-1860s show these characteristics and can be found in yellow, orange and red.

A change in the color which a post office used, such as red to black, sometimes occurs with a postal rate change, a change in postmasters, a change in the political control, or it can just mean that the postmaster ran out of ink and decided to change colors. See Figure 2. Infrequently the change in colors was made without the postal clerks bothering to clean the handstamps. The result is a little mixing of the old color with the new for a short period afterwards.

Figure 2. Elizabeth City circular date stamp in light blue with matching PAID 50, double rate to Connecticut. *Although this handstamp was used from 1826 to 1836, the color blue was used only in 1835.*

The postal rates[2] are an involved study unto themselves. They are best investigated with good references at hand, but the information derived from them is invaluable to a postal historian as they can often date material closely. A generalized list of minimum weight letter rates up until the Civil War is furnished as a supplement to give an idea of the frequent changes which have taken place.

The advent of the postage stamp in the United States is another area of great interest. The first two U.S. stamps, the five cent Franklin and ten cent Washington, appeared on July 1, 1847, and were used until they were replaced by the 1851 issue. They are found mostly from major post offices unless used by a traveler who had carried them to a smaller post office. The 1847 series and the 1851-56 series were without perforations, which were added in 1857 to stamps printed from the same plates as used in 1851-56.

All postage stamps printed and put into service by the United States are still valid for postage with the exception of the series of 1847 issue which became invalid when the second issue became available on 1 July 1851, and the series of 1851 which was demonetized in 1861 to prevent its use in the Confederacy. An illustration of this is a cover (Figure 3) postmarked ASHVILLE/N.C./AUG/9/1880. It was franked with a 3¢ issue of 1857-61 which someone probably found stuck away. The postage stamp was canceled with a circular handstamp reading, "HELD FOR POSTAGE", meaning that it was 3¢ postage due.

Figure 3. Attempted use of the demonetized 1857-61 federal postage in 1880. This and the 1847 U.S. issues were the only ones that were demonetized. Canceling handstamp reads "Held for Postage"

Certain public officials have had free franking privileges.[3] The President of the United State has the privilege as does his widow. Senators and congressmen have the privilege for their office purposes. Various state and federal officials have had the franking privilege for their official duties, such as envoys and militia officers. The operational phrase for such franking was, "On Public Service," and signed by the official.

Postmasters had the free franking privilege and could both send and receive mail free. The received mail was ostensibly either on post office business or their private business. The free frank was for the first 1/4 ounce or first letter sheet. All additional weight or letter sheets had to bear the appropriate rate.

In the early 1800s the free frank was changed to affect only postmasters whose offices produced less than $200 annual income. Figure 4 shows a folded letter containing a printed circular of William Coleman, hatter and postmaster in Asheville, offering to sell hats for $10 to $30 per dozen.

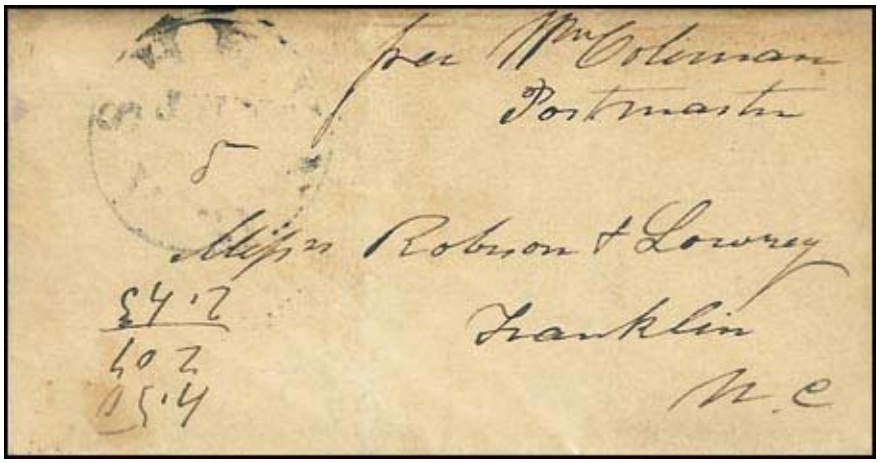

Figure 4. Free frank of William Coleman, hatter and postmaster from August 23, 1823 to February 2, 1842. The content of the letter to his customer, Robinson & Lowry, in Franklin was a price list for Coleman's hats.

The franking privilege was part of the personage of the postmaster, as it traveled with him wherever he went. Calvin Jones, postmaster at Wake Forest, prowled the gold fields of North Carolina about 1830 and used his free frank to send letters from Bedfordville in Burke County to his wife in Wake Forest. (Figure 5).

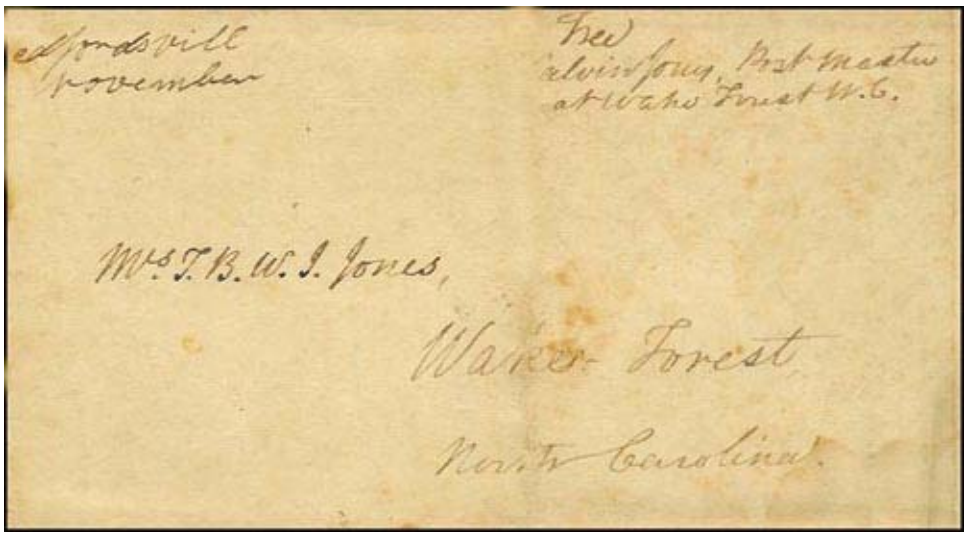

Figure 5. Calvin Jones, postmaster at Wake Forest had an interest in a gold mine during the North Carolina Gold Rush of 1824-40. His free frank can be found from several towns in the gold mining region. This one is a manuscript Bedfordsvill(e).

The physical structure of the letter can often speak to the era in which it was produced. The folded letter was the first form. The letter was written on one side of a sheet of paper, folded, sealed, and the address was written on the outside. A variation of this was to place a blank piece of paper with the letter sheet, fold, seal, and address the outer wrapper.

The postal regulations of 1794 directed that each piece of paper should be charged the single letter rate. Thus, a single folded letter sheet would be charged at the 1/4 ounce rate. If a single letter sheet with wrapper, the double rate, and a third sheet would be the triple rate. Above one ounce, the charge would be the single letter rate multiplied by the number of 1/4 ounces the letter weighed.

Envelopes made their appearance in the late 1840s. By 1855, they accounted for the majority of the letters mailed. The first postally stamped envelopes were made available in 1853. During the Civil War, due to the extreme shortage of paper, envelopes were often hand made from any spare paper available. The well-run southern household would use a steamed open envelope as a template and make covers from wallpaper, maps, brown wrapping paper and blank forms. These are called adversity covers and make fascinating collectibles. Another form of adversity cover was a postally used envelope which had been turned inside out and reused.

For seven days, from May 21, 1861 until May 27, 1861, North Carolina was a part of neither the United States nor the Confederacy.[4] The Federal postage during the period of independent statehood was honored with the postmasters sending the fees collected to the postmaster general in Washington.

In the Confederate period of May 27 until October 22, 1861, the postmasters had to operate without postage stamps, so they generally reverted to the pre-stamp means of operation, i.e., handstamps or manuscript markings. Some of them obtained new handstamps; some had retained the old ones which were pressed back into service, and some postmasters actually printed their own stamps. Other postmasters provided envelopes preprinted with postal markings, which represented stamps, or they preprinted blank envelopes which the public had on hand. These envelopes with control marks are known as postmasters provisionals.

Many of the covers which we collect are of interest to the genealogist, especially if the letter's contents are intact and the subject of the letter is family matters. Siblings can be identified from cousins; relatives living in the same household can be identified; family members who historically disappeared can be accounted for (the "Went West" syndrome), to mention only a few situations. Moments in history can be recalled and the times better understood by identifying the writer, addressee and the events which shaped their lives. Such a cover (Figure 6) carried a December 27, 1860 letter to Walter Waighstill Lenoir. It was from his friend and classmate at the University of North Carolina, and then congressman from North Carolina, Zebulon Baird Vance. The cover was free franked with his signature. The contents[5] describe the

efforts of the moderate Members of Congress to form a Middle Confederacy for the purpose of keeping the two extremes separate and from fighting each other.

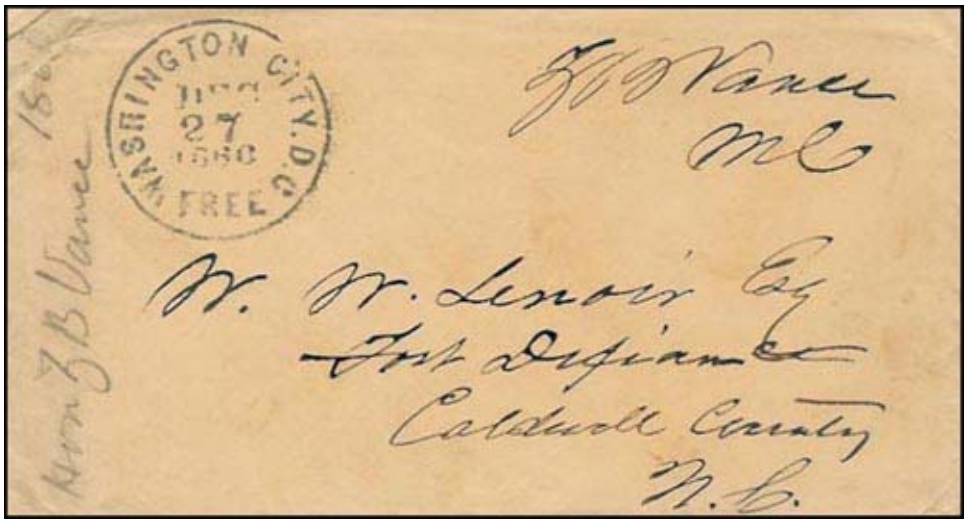

Figure 6. Free Frank of Zebulon Baird Vance as Member of Congress, used in December 1860 to his classmate at the University of North Carolina, William W. Lenoir. Rep. Vance was writing for support of the Middle Confederacy plan which was designed to prevent the Civil War.

A later cover (Figure 7) dated July 14, 1862, is addressed to the same W.W. Lenoir who is now a lieutenant in the Confederate Army. It has a manuscript "Official" marking, from Captain William T. Nicholson, Adjutant, 37th N.C.T., in the field near Richmond. The letter was sent to Lt. Lenoir at the city of Lenoir, Caldwell County where the lieutenant had raised a new company of men. The letter[6] was forwarded to Kittrell's where the new company was in training, and it offered Lt. Lenoir a captaincy in the 37th Regiment, which he accepted. About five weeks later Capt. Lenoir was in the battle of Ox Hill where he lost a leg.

Figure 7. Semi-official Confederate army letter to Lieutenant William W. Lenoir. It was forwarded from Lenoir to Kittrell's in Vance County with the DUE 10 handstamp. The letter was from (Capt.) William T. Nicholson, Adjutant of the 37th Regiment, North Carolina Troops.

A still later cover (Figure 8), from the great Confederate hospital in Salisbury is from Capt. W.W. Lenoir and addressed to his mother at Fort Defiance, the Lenoir homestead, now Fort Defiance State Park. We can only imagine the contents of that letter. After being released from the hospital, he recuperated at that place and moved to the family's western land holdings at Forks of Pigeon in Haywood County for the rest of the war.

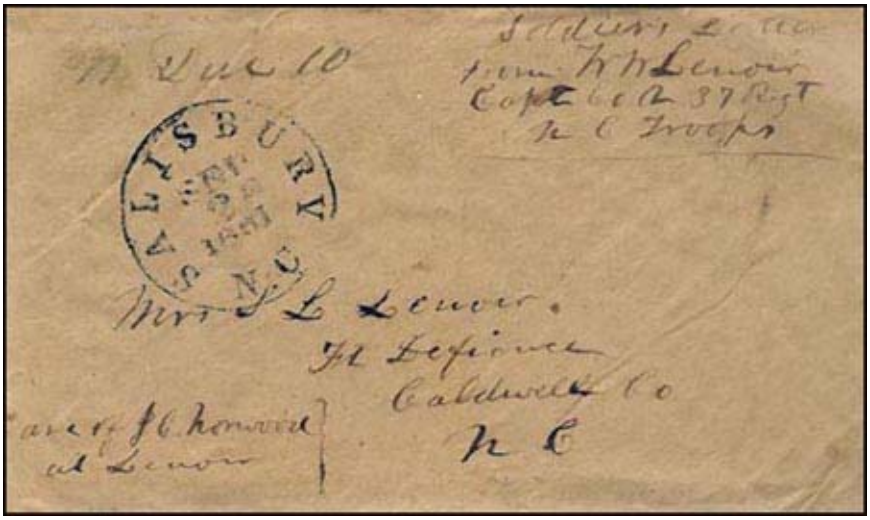

Figure 8. Soldier's Letter from W.W. Lenoir, Capt. Company R, 37 Regiment, N.C. Troops, to his mother, Mrs. S. I. Lenoir, Fort Defiance, Caldwell County, N.C. Docketing at lower left reads: Care of J.C. Norwood at Lenoir.

The antithesis of these poignant Civil War letters can be found in covers addressed to Benjamin Hedrick. Hedrick was professor of chemistry at UNC and was too outspoken in his abolitionist cause. He was dismissed from the University and literally chased out of the state. Professor Hedrick became a clerk in the US Patent Office in Philadelphia and did not return to academia.

A great many post offices no longer exist. They are called DPOs, short for dead post offices. A few of the North Carolina DPOs are Averasboro or Averysboro in Harnett County, Baird's Forge in Burke, Caldwell in Mecklenburg and Danamora in Guilford. Carolina City, a land development plan in what is now part of Morehead City, existed from 1857 until it was made into a Confederate Army training camp. After the war, it was abandoned. Many other post offices have had name changes. Warm Springs became Hot Springs, Morristown became Asheville, Little Yadkin in Stokes County became Pilot Mountain, then Little Yadkin again, and then changed to Dalton until it was discontinued. Antebellum Tarborough became Tawboro during the war and then Tarboro after the war. The Taw-to-Tar change was caused by the European settlers misunderstanding the American Indians word for the river, which they called Taw. This misunderstanding was further compounded by the local manufacture of tar from pine pitch.

New Berne is one of the most interesting of North Carolina postal markings to collect and study. The many markings range widely in style and, further, New Berne was occupied by Federal troops who brought their own cancelers, but fancy cancellations were not confined to the Yankees at New Berne. The postmaster at Leo, Washington County, in 1851, carved a heart out of boxwood with the legend LEO/N C. The date was applied by pen. The earliest North Carolina fancy cancel, and only known copy, is a straight line WILMINGTON, N.C. with fancy scrolls top and bottom. This cover is supposedly in a New York City bank lock box and has not been seen by the collecting community for many years.

Civil War propaganda can be found printed on envelopes as cachets. They are slogans, caricatures, emblems, poems and cartoons. Both North and South used this Patriotic format, but it was used far more extensively in the North where there was more access to printing presses and paper.

In the latter part of the 1800s, businesses used cachets on envelopes as a form of advertising. They could be as simple as a blind-embossed corner card, a fancy return address corner card, an illustration of buildings or product, or as fancy as an all-over advertisement. The advertising envelope is still with us today and is most often found on our bills and junk mail.

An outgrowth of the advertising cover is the philatelic cacheted cover known as a first day cover or special event cover. These are prepared for sale to the collector and have minor postal history interest. Postal history, as a hobby, takes the philatelic specialist, who has necessarily narrowed his field, and widens that field again into more satisfying collecting. It combines the philatelist's urge to collect, and to his need to know the past.

Notes:

1. Alex L. ter Braake, *The Postal Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America* (State College, Pennsylvania: American Philatelic Society, 1975).
2. James E. Kloetzel ed., *Specialized Catalog of United States Stamps* (Sidney, Ohio: Scott Publishing Co., 2004).
3. David G. Phillips ed., *American Stampless Cover Catalog* 3 vols., Volume 1, Fifth Edition (North Miama, Florida: David G. Phillips, 1997).
4. Hubert C. Skinner, Erin R. Gunter and Warren H. Sanders, *The New Dietz Confederate States Catalog and Handbook* (Miami, Florida: Bogg & Laurence Publishing Co., 1986).
5. Frontis W. Johnston ed., *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance* 2 vols. (Raleigh, North Carolina: State Department of Archives & History, 1963) vol. 1, pp. 74-78.
6. Thomas F. Hikerson, *Echoes of Happy Valley* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Distributed by Bull's Head Bookshop, 1962), p. 83.

Appendix

Single Letter Rates

Colonial: 1692-1765		4d (4 pence) to 1/9d (1 shilling & 9 pence) depending on number of sheets and distance
Continental Congress:		5¼d to 32d (1774)
Confederation Period:		4d and up depending on distance (1775). Increased 50% in 1777. Doubled in 1779. 4d and up rate of 1775 multiplied by 20 (1779). Doubled 1779 rate in 1780. 1780s had similar confusion.
Statehood:	-1792:	6 cent to 25 cents depending on distance. Some letters bore both British Sterling and US cent rate.
	-1799	8 cents to 25 cents.
	-1815	All rates increased 50%.
	-1816	Return to 1799 rates.
	-1825	Currency adjustment- 18¾ cents equaled 1½ Riales.
	-1845	5 cents first 300 miles, 10 cents over 300 miles.
	-1851	3 cents first 3,000 miles prepaid, 5 cents collect; double for over 3,000 miles.
	-1855	Compulsory prepayment of 3 cents for first 3,000 miles and 10 cents over 3,000.
	-1861	3 cent rate any distance.
Confederate:	- 1861	5 cents first 300 miles, 10 cents over 300 miles.
	-1862	10 cents first 300 miles, 20 cents over